

# Dust and Stone:

## Caucasian Sketches in Lermontov, Mandelstam and Grossman

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“YOU should stop walking barefoot here! You’re not in the North, you’re not in Europe – the Caucasus is dusty”. While I was travelling in Georgia, a friend of mine from Tbilisi pointed out this feature I had not considered before: dust is an element you find everywhere in the Caucasus. Alongside the presence of dust all over the place, my eyes were struck by the stone, another component characterising Caucasian sceneries and landscapes. Stony Georgian churches are built on the top of stony mountains; revolting snakes hide under incandescent stones in the Azerbaijani desert of Qobustan, where nomadic pre-historic people carved their memories on rocky walls; Armenian churches made of stone dominate rocky valleys, where people as ancient as stone managed to cut *khachkar*<sup>1</sup> out of it.

My experience as a traveller triggered my interest in exploring to what extent the vast literary production set in the Caucasus has dealt with two elements characterising this region – dust and stone. In particular, this essay focuses on travel literature and aims at investigating how the two abovementioned elements are perceived as belonging to a reality “other” than everyday life and whether they are enriched with symbolic value.

Stone as a characterising element of the Caucasus dominates not only the traveller’s perception, but also the Caucasians’ view of their land, as witnessed by indigenous literature. A recent and meaningful example is provided by *Daş yuxular-Каменные Сны* [Stone Dreams, 2012] published in the Russian journal *Druzhba Narodov*, a novel written by the Azerbaijani author Akram Aylisli. The plot rotates around the comatose dreams of the Azerbaijani actor Saday Sadykhly after he was

beaten by a group of compatriots while trying to protect an Armenian woman. Whereas contemporary reality is characterised by the anti-Armenian pogroms – which occurred in Azerbaijan in the late 1980’s – and the narration often evokes the historical reality of 1919 – when the Nakhichevan Armenians were slaughtered by the Turkish army –, the oneiric reality of Saday’s dreams is captured by the stones of Aylis, his native village in Nakhichevan, where “кто-то собрал все высеченные из камня ступеньки и уступы мира и выстроил их сколько хватает глаз в этом самом узком ущелье Ай-лиса”<sup>2</sup>. Here the main church is called *kamennaya tserkov’* [stone church], the walls are made of stone, the streets are stony, and stones are what the children in Aylis throw at the doors.

Beyond the title, in the novel stone is revealed both as a primordial element upon which Armenia created a land as beautiful as Paradise, and as a metaphorical state of mind connected to dream and coma, which eventually led to death.

Coming back to the perception of the Caucasus in travel writing, here I focus on Russian literature, which has been affected by the complex relationship between forms of government (the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation) and a land that alternatively was part of them<sup>3</sup>. Whereas Soviet criticism read the conquest of the Caucasus both as instance of tsarist colonialism<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The typical Armenian cross-stone.

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<sup>2</sup> “Someone collected all the steps and benching carved in stone in the world and set them forth as far as the eye can see in that narrow canyon of Aylis”, link <<http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2012/12/aa5.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> The Caucasus was gradually annexed to the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (first under Peter I, then during the so-called Caucasian War in 1817-64), it was divided in several republics belonging to the Soviet Union, some of which became officially autonomous – still unofficially under the Russian influence – at the beginning of the Nineties.

<sup>4</sup> See S. Vel’tman, *Vostok v khudozhestvennoj literature*,

and, conversely, as an act of liberation from reactionary forces (such as Shamyľ's Islamic opposition)<sup>5</sup>, more recent studies after Orientalist theories<sup>6</sup> tend either to apply Said's analysis to Imperial Russia<sup>7</sup> or to highlight the two main specificities of the Russian situation: on the one hand the Russian Empire must be viewed as a multicultural organism in which a Russian core interfaces with its varied peripheries, lacking the territorial discontinuities typical of the European Empires<sup>8</sup>; on the other hand, Russia is studied as being simultaneously subject and object of Orientalism, displaying both western and eastern features in the discourse of power and knowledge<sup>9</sup>. As noted by Ferrari<sup>10</sup>, a post-colonial reading of the relationships between Russia and the Caucasus has become common in post-soviet times in the Slavic studies in English language, but fundamentally absent among the Russian scholars<sup>11</sup>.

I will show how the Caucasian "otherness" is peculiar in its acquaintance with the Russian eye; in addition, given that the status of Oriental Cauca-

sus is not geographically motivated (the Caucasus is South to Russia) and affected by the Oriental status of Russia itself (Russia is East to Europe), the texts I will consider do not display a clear hegemonic imbalance between a dominating Russia and a dominated Caucasus<sup>12</sup>. In the light of this, the elements of stone and dust are analysed as chthonic components characterising the otherness of this corner of the world so different from Russia<sup>13</sup>, but so close to it. In order to unveil how the stone and the dust in the Caucasus are perceived by Russian writers and whether these elements are enriched with symbolic values, I've focused my analysis on three pivotal writers, who actually travelled in the Caucasus and wrote about it – Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41), Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) and Vasily Grossman (1905-64).

Although belonging to different times, in which the relationships between Russia and the Caucasus were different – when Lermontov visits Georgia, it is part of the Russian Empire, whereas at the time of Mandelstam's and Grossman's journeys to Armenia, it is part of the Soviet Union – the three authors are absorbed by the Caucasus and such fascination affects their production.

Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov (1814-1841) travelled in the Caucasus twice when he was a child (in 1820 and 1825)<sup>14</sup>, before serving there in 1837 and 1840<sup>15</sup>. The Caucasus became the place where he

Moskva, Leningrad 1928; N. Svirin, "Russkaya Kolonial'naya literatura", *Literaturny kritik*, 1934, 9, pp. 76-79.

<sup>5</sup> An account of the complex relationship between Russia and the Islamic entities in the North Caucasus is provided by M. Bennigsen Broxup, *The North Caucasus Barrier. The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World*, London 1992.

<sup>6</sup> A list of studies on Russian Orientalism is provided in V. Tolz, "Orientalism, nationalism, and ethnic diversity in late Imperial Russia", *The Historical Journal*, 2005, 48, p. 130. The studies she considers are listed as follows: "Ab imperio: Theory and History of Nationalities and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Realm", 2002 (1), link <<http://abimperio.net>>; S. Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoi*, Cambridge 1994; M. Greenleaf, *Pushkin and romantic fashion: fragment, elegy, Orient, irony*, Stanford 1994; R. Geraci, *Window on the East*, Ithaca 2009; D. Brower, E. Lazzerini, *Russia's Orient: imperial borderlands and peoples, 1700-1917*, Bloomington 1997; M. Bassin, *Imperial visions: nationalist imagination and geographical expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865*, Cambridge 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See A. Khalid, N. Knight, M. Todorova, "Ex tempore: Orientalism and Russia", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2000 (1), 4, pp. 691-727.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich. Entstehung. Geschichte. Zerfall*, München 1992.

<sup>9</sup> See N. Knight, "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the service of empire?", *Slavic Review*, 2000, 59, pp. 74-100.

<sup>10</sup> A. Ferrari, *Quando il Caucaso incontrò la Russia. Cinque storie esemplari*, Milano 2015, pp. 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> A remarkable exception is provided by a Saidian analysis of the relationships between Russia and the Northern Caucasus in V.O. Bobronikov, I.L. Babich, *Severny Kavkaz v sostave Rossijskoj Imperii*, Moskva 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Some Saidian readings of *A Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov – one of the works mentioned later – highlight how the novel displays a clash between a masculine representation of Russia and its feminine counterpart, the Caucasus to be seduced. See P. Scotto, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov's 'Bela'", *PMLA*, 1992, 107, (2), pp. 246-260; S. Layton, *Russian Literature*, op. cit., pp. 133-155. However, I claim that Lermontov's attitude towards the Caucasus resembles that of a seducing lover rather than a violent conqueror, as suggested, for instance, by the verse *lyublyu ya Kavkaz* [I love the Caucasus] repeated three times in the poem *Kavkaz* [Caucasus, 1830]. See M.Yu. Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenij*, I, Leningrad 1989, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> One may claim that dust and stone are widely displayed in the literature connected to the city of Petersburg and thus cannot be considered as components alien to Russia. However, whereas in Petersburg the presence of dust and stone is caused by human activity, which typically subjugates nature by creating an artificial reality, the same elements in the Caucasus are parts of nature itself and peculiar traits of the Caucasian landscapes. See E. Lo Gatto, *Il mito di Pietroburgo*, Milano 1960.

<sup>14</sup> V.A. Mnuchov, *Lermontovskaya entsiklopediya*, Moskva 1981, p. 644.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 648-650.

decided to set the vast majority of his production. From Pushkin onwards, Russian Romanticism has created a myth on the Caucasian mountains, as sublime, dangerous, rejuvenating and inspiring as the Alps<sup>16</sup>; the Caucasus, a “homeland’s own periphery”<sup>17</sup> to the Russian eye has thus become a productive scenario because of its exotic and simultaneously familiar nature. Lermontov’s references to the Caucasus can thus be considered as part of this broader phenomenon of captivation. Ripellino notes that Lermontov’s narration takes place between the earth and the sky<sup>18</sup>, and the Caucasus is the place where the chthonic reality touches the celestial component. If the Caucasus is the theatre where Lermontov sets his narration, stones and dust are intrinsic elements of the stage.

Here I have considered some poems by Lermontov and his novel *Geroy nashego vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time, 1840]. Although he died at the age of twenty-six in a duel, Lermontov demonstrated his talent as writer since his very first verses composed in his early teens.

*Kavkazsky plennik* [The Prisoner of the Caucasus, 1828], one of Lermontov’s early poems, provides a meaningful example of how the Caucasian setting interacts with the plot. The descriptions of the environment are characterised by two natural elements, the river Terek and the fog, which remind one of motion and mystery respectively. The presence of dust and stone are limited, though meaningful; dust is used to evoke a fight, in which a warrior “бежит, глотая пыль и прах”<sup>19</sup>, whereas stony is the rock on which the Circassian girl stands and cries her love to the Russian prisoner she has just freed<sup>20</sup>. The dust swallowed by the fighter is a brush stroke characterising the surrounding setting; conversely, with a metonymic shift, the stone also represents the girl it supports in its solidity and concreteness by putting the moral values of the

character in a consonant environment.

Interestingly, the elements of stone and dust are juxtaposed in another poem related to the Caucasus, *Svidan’e* [The date, 1841], which is set in Tbilisi and reads:

[...] И на дорогу пыльную  
Винтовку наведу.  
Напрасно грудь колышется!  
Я лег между камней [...] <sup>21</sup>.

As in the previous poem, the dust and the stones contribute to creating the stage in which the characters play their roles. In particular, the dusty road is the pictorial element that suggests the otherness of the landscape, and the man lying on stones evokes a pre-civilised stage, when people had a closer connection with nature.

Moving to the novel *A Hero of Our Time*, the main character Pechorin mirrors the author in his being a young Russian man travelling in the Caucasus. The cultural clash between Russia and the Caucasus is emphasised by the otherness shown in the Caucasian landscape; its nature, wildness and strength are juxtaposed with Russian artificiality, its stifling society and meaningless spleen. In particular, stone is not only the core element of the Caucasian mountains, but it is also a pattern found in human activity. In the novel the roads, the houses and the crosses are made of stone, as if to suggest a continuity between the solidity of the landscape and the people inhabiting it. Also dust has a pictorial value, as in the quotations “вдали вилась пыль”<sup>22</sup> and “пыльный бархатный сюртучок его”<sup>23</sup>.

Lermontov’s interest in the Caucasian landscape and its picturesque features is reflected not only in his written production, but also in his paintings, watercolours and sketches<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly, in the pictures representing the Caucasian mountains [as in Fig. 1] and Tbilisi [as in Fig. 2], Lermontov is particularly committed to emphasising the profiles and contours of the rocks characterising the landscape.

<sup>16</sup> An interesting discussion on the creation of an imaginative geography of the Caucasus by the Russian Romantics is provided in S. Layton, *Russian Literature*, op. cit., p. 36-53.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> A.M. Ripellino, “Sulla Poesia di Lermontov”, M. Lermontov, *Liriche e poemi*, Torino 1963, p. IX.

<sup>19</sup> “(He) runs, swallowing dust and powder”, M.Yu. Lermontov, *Polnoe sobranie*, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> “And on a dusty road / the rifle, I’ll bring. / In vain my breast shakes / I lay among the stones”, Ibidem, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> “Dust was whirling in the distance”, Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> “His velvet overcoat was covered with dust”, Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Some noticeable paintings by Lermontov on the Caucasian theme are: *The Georgian military road near Mtskheta*, oil (1830); *Tiflis*, pencil (1837); *View of Tiflis*, oil (1837); *Caucasian view with camels*, oil (1837-38).





Fig. 1. M.Yu. Lermontov, *Dariali gorge with Queen Tamar's castle*, 1837, pencil on paper, 22x29 cm, Tarkhany Russian State Museum, Belinsky District

Provided that stones and dust are elements often mentioned by Lermontov<sup>25</sup>, their distribution suggests a scenic and ornamental usage of the two components, highly linked to the Caucasian landscape and its people.



Fig. 2. M.Yu. Lermontov, *View of Tbilisi*, 1837, oil on cardboard, 32,2x39,5 cm, National Literary Museum, Moscow

A century later Lermontov, precisely in 1930, Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam (1891-1938) was in Armenia and Georgia together with his wife

Nadezhda, and there he became interested in Armenian culture and language. He published *Puteshestvie v Armeniyu* [Journey to Armenia, 1933] in the journal *Zvezda*, and in the literary journal *Literaturnaya Armeniya* in 1967<sup>26</sup>. As noted by Ripellino, Mandelstam's shattered prose is more evident here than anywhere else<sup>27</sup>; the Armenian setting serves as a shelter, where it's possible to find relief from "the watermelon-like emptiness of Russia"<sup>28</sup> and the resentment of arrogant attackers.

Mandelstam's prose is complex and inscrutable at a first impression; when reading *Journey to Armenia*, one is struck by the thickness of verbal matter<sup>29</sup> and an extraordinary density of unusual images, consequences of Mandelstam's anxiety in making the word correspond with the object<sup>30</sup>. Its textual density interplays with a vocabulary that is often taken from sciences, in particular from biology and geology. Whereas dust is essentially absent, the presence of different kinds of stones should be considered in the light of Mandelstam's interest in the naturalists and their works, to which a whole chapter is devoted<sup>31</sup>. Elements belonging to *Regnum Animale* and *Regnum Vegetabile* are contaminated by the *Regnum Lapideum*, such as the nasturtium leaves turning into silicon arrows<sup>32</sup> and Russian mushrooms hiding precious lapis lazuli<sup>33</sup>.

Not surprisingly in the chapter *Ashtarak*, named after the Armenian town, the stone is an element which plays with other natural elements, such as snow, clouds and the sky.

Ямщицкая гора, сверкающая снегом, кротовое поле, как будто с издевательской целью засеянное каменными зубьями, нумерованные бараки строительства и набитая пассажирами консервная жестянка — вот вам окрестности Эривани<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> O. Mandelstam, *Sobranie sochinenij v trekh tomakh*, II, New York 1971, p. 592; S. Vitale, "Nota del curatore", O. Mandel'stam, *Viaggio in Armenia*, Milano 1988, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> A.M. Ripellino, "Note sulla prosa di Mandel'stam", O. Mandel'stam, *La quarta prosa*, Bari 1967, pp. 7-15.

<sup>28</sup> O. Mandelstam, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> One of the chapters is named *Vokrug naturalistov* (On the Naturalists).

<sup>32</sup> O. Mandelstam, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 163.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 169; for the English version see "Coachman's Mountain glistening in the snow, a mole field, sown as if for some mocking purpose with stony teeth, the numbered barracks on construction sites, and a can packed to the brim with passengers: there you have

<sup>25</sup> In Lermontov's written production, the words *kamen'* [stone] and *pyl'* [dust] occur 142 and 53 times respectively, as indicated by the "Chastotny slovar' yazyka M.Yu. Lermontova" in V.A. Mnuijov, *Lermontovskaya Entsiklopediya*, op. cit., pp. 717-773.

The stony teeth are the artificial human intrusions in a natural landscape; later in the chapter, the gardens are “Каменные корзинки [...] отличнейший бенефисный подарок для колоратурного сопрано”<sup>35</sup>. Then Mandelstam mentions Armenian architecture and the stones it is built with. As noted by Przybylski<sup>36</sup>, in Mandelstam’s poetics the word architecture is linked to the philosophical concept of system. The connection between building and knowing explains the reason why in *Journey to Armenia* the eye is the organ that shapes reason and knowledge and its capacity is filtered by previous knowledge. When facing Armenian architecture, the eye cannot find shapes and ideas, it stumbles across a *kamenny pirog* [stony cake]<sup>37</sup>, especially when its visual pattern (metaphorically named *zuby zreniya* [teeth of vision])<sup>38</sup> is puzzled by Armenian churches.

After stony teeth representing human activities, stony baskets as gardens in Erevan and the stony cake that refers to Armenian architecture, a fourth trivial element made of stone is used to describe an Armenian characteristic – “Армянский язык – неизнашиваемый – каменные сапоги”<sup>39</sup>. Because language is a crucial feature of Armenia and a primary symbol of it<sup>40</sup>, this last metaphor connecting Armenian language to stone must be considered as fundamental; the unusual guttural sounds, its long documented history, and the fascination linked to the unreachable lead the author to find parallels between the Armenian language and the rough strength and inscrutable antiquity of the stone.

Alongside the concreteness of the descriptions in line with Acmeism and its complex interplay with the natural sciences, stone addresses a deeper level of awareness connected to the role of the jour-

ney. As Isenberg suggests, Mandelstam’s journey can be read as a healing and regenerative process, in that “for Mandelstam, the same forces ‘permanently ranging in the universe’ result in the metaphoric word-stone and the massive stoniness of a mountain”<sup>41</sup>. For its attractive healing force, stone is thus not only a structural component of Mandelstam’s poetics but also a stage in the regenerative act of travelling in a neo-Lamarckian sense<sup>42</sup>.

The last author I have considered, Vasily Semyonovich Grossman (1905-1964), shares at least four fundamental traits with Mandelstam – both of them are of Jewish origin, had troubles with the Soviet authorities, travelled in Armenia, and composed a literary work after it<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, Grossman was struck by the stone in Armenia, as Mandelstam was.

Grossman’s journey to Armenia lasted only two months in 1961. His *Dobro Vam!*<sup>44</sup> [An Armenian Sketchbook, 1965] was written one year later and published in the journal *Literaturnaya Armeniya*<sup>45</sup>. Not surprisingly, this travel report is “Grossman’s political testament, a discussion of the values he holds dearest – in art and life”<sup>46</sup>, thus endorsing the ideas that the journey can be the metaphor of life and that a more objective reflection on the self can be pursued when one is far from their trivial environment.

The element of stone in *An Armenian Sketchbook* is crucial and introduced in the very beginning of the book.

the environs of Erevan”, Idem, *The Noise of Time: And Other Prose Pieces*, London, New York 1988, p. 219.

<sup>35</sup> “The stone basket [...] would make the most splendid gift for the coloratura soprano at a charity performance”, Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>36</sup> R. Przybylski, *An Essay on the Poetry of Osip Mandelstam: God’s Grateful Guest*, eng. transl. by M.G. Levine, Ann Arbor 1987, p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> O. Mandelstam, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> “The Armenian language is wearproof, a pair of boots made of stone”, Ibidem, p. 170.

<sup>40</sup> I. Semenko, *Poetika pozdnego Mandelstama*, Roma 1986, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> C. Isenberg, *Substantial Proofs of Being: Osip Mandelstam’s Literary Prose*, Columbus 1987, p.160.

<sup>42</sup> According to neo-Lamarckism, selection is a secondary force in evolution. Great importance is given to the environment and the interaction it has with the species. Mandelstam’s idea of travelling as a regenerating process should be read at the light of this strong interaction between the environment and the man and the capability the environment has of changing the human beings. See P.J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900*, Baltimore, London 1992, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> A. Ferrari, “L’Armenia di Vasilij Grossman”, *L’umano nell’uomo: Vasilij Grossman tra ideologie e domande eterne*, a cura di P. Tosco, Soveria Mannelli 2011, p. 436.

<sup>44</sup> The Russian title is a literal translation of the Armenian greeting *barev jes*, which means “good to you”.

<sup>45</sup> See S.P. Markish, *Le cas Grossman*, Paris, Lausanne 1983, pp. 174-176.

<sup>46</sup> R. Chandler, Yu. Bit-Yunan, “Introduction”, V. Grossman, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, New York 2013, p. VII.

Первые впечатления от Армении — утром, в поезде. Камень зеленовато-серый, он не горой стоит, не утесом, он — плоская россыпь, каменное поле; гора умерла, ее скелет рассыпался по полю. Время состарило, умертвило гору, и вот лежат кости горы<sup>47</sup>.

Stone is the first Armenian element seen by the author, and the element Armenia is based on. As time had killed the mountain, its bones become the stones characterising the Armenian landscape.

Moving from the image of fields of stones, Grossman depicts the villages of Armenia as characterised by grey stones, before giving life to stone itself in the description of sheep, moving grey stones born from stone which “едят они, наверное, каменную крошку и пьют каменную пыль”<sup>48</sup>. The material metamorphosis of Armenia into its creating element reaches its zenith in the sentence “Люди — как эти камни, среди которых они живут”<sup>49</sup>.

Stone is mentioned again in the chapter devoted to Grossman’s trip to Lake Sevan. The author notes, “Севан лежит в россыпи камней”<sup>50</sup>, impressed by the lack of a gradual transition between the lake and the ground and the total separation between deep blue water and dry mountain stone. As in the *incipit* of the book, stone is connected to time in the vivid phrase “геологическая тяжесть времени”<sup>51</sup>, where the chronological element of time is crystallised as a geological entity, as concrete and tangible as stone.

The stone is also symbol of disillusion and disenchantment. The sensation-perception (in Russian

*oshushenie*) Grossman had of Armenia was influenced by the paintings of Martiros Saryan (1880–1972), who depicted his own country in bright and joyful colours, as seen in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3. M. Saryan, *Armenia*, 1923, oil on canvas. 138x103 cm, Armenian National Gallery, Yerevan

Although we don’t know which paintings by Saryan Grossman was familiar with, the joyful atmosphere of harmony between nature and people depicted in Saryan’s “Armenia” clashes with Grossman’s view, as overtly stated in the following quotation:

Должен признаться, что полотна Сарьяна, которые я видел в Москве, не помогли мне ощутить Армению. Я ее увидел по-иному. Мне пришлось соскresti со своей души яркую радость сарьяновских картин, чтобы ощутить туманный древний камень трагического армянского пейзажа<sup>52</sup>.

Grossman’s first hand experience as a traveller turned the imagined joyful Armenia into a land of

<sup>47</sup> V. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenij v chetyrekh tomakh. Povest', rasskazy, ocherki*, Moskva 1998, p. 150; for the English version see “I first glimpsed Armenia from the train, early in the morning: greenish-grey rock — not mountains or crags but scree, flat deposits of stone, fields of stone. A mountain had died, its skeleton had been scattered over the ground. Time had aged the mountain; time had killed the mountain’s bones”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 150; for the English version see “Maybe eat powdered stone and drink the dust of stone”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 150; for the English version see “The men are like the stones they live among”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 178; for the English version see “Sevan lies in the middle of a great scattering of stones”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 178; for the English version see “The geological weight of time”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>52</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 180; for the English version see “I have to say that the paintings by Saryan that I had seen in Moscow did nothing to help me sense the reality of Armenia. My own perception of Armenia is different. To sense Armenia’s tragic landscape and its misty, ancient stone I found I had to erase from my soul the brilliant joy of Saryan’s paintings”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 51.



misty and ancient stone. Of particular interest is the lexical choice of the adjectives used to describe Armenian stone, i.e., *tumannyy* [misty] and *drevnyy* [ancient]. The former is connected to blurred senses; what is misty is unknown, it is partially revealed but impossible to be understood in its wholeness. The latter adjective is introduced in this book in reference to Armenian villages, churches, buildings, people, and their dances. Its chronological value here endorses the symbolic value of stone as a sort of incarnation of time.

The relationship between time and stone is crucial again in chapter 10, since its opening: “Первое, что я увидел, приехав в Армению, был камень. Уезжая, я увез виденье камня”<sup>53</sup>, and again “Камень выразил характер и душу армянской страны”<sup>54</sup>; stone is thus the distinguishing component of Armenia both as a superficial priming element and as its deepest and defining characteristic. However, the primordial cause of the amount of scattered stones is neither Armenia nor its inhabitants; the stonecutter is time.

Grossman imagines a battle between two monsters, *ogromnaya kamennaya gora* [the huge stony mountain] and *gromada vremeni* [the bulk of time]<sup>55</sup>. Interestingly, in Russian the word *gromada* [bulk] has collocations with mountain – *gromada gory* [the bulk of the mountain] – and not with time, thus suggesting a connection between the two enemies which are grouped together by the author at a lexical level. The battle has a winner, “Время торжествует, оно непобедимо”<sup>56</sup>, and the bones of the defeated mountain are the stones spread on the battle fields. Stone is no longer the materialisation of time; time towers over stone, which is the dead dross of its restless activity. One of the few occurrences of dust is found in this passage, when the defeated mountains turn into dust. Whereas stones are the bones of dead mountains,

dust is the furthest and definitive stage of death, as if the dead stones had definitely lost the memory that kept the stony matter together.

The bond between death and memory conveyed by stone and dust can be also found in *Zhizn' i sud'ba* [Life and Fate, 1980], Grossman's masterpiece, which was “kidnapped” a few months before his journey to Armenia<sup>57</sup>. Whereas the novel was first published in 1980, it was submitted to the journal *Znamya* already in 1960; in February 1961, the KGB raided Grossman's flat and confiscated his manuscript and notebooks<sup>58</sup>.

In book 1, chapter 33, Lyudmila discovers her son's grave, set in a yard where pre-revolutionary stone-crosses stand. The emotional *pustota* [emptiness] of the woman in this gloomy moment is described as if “над головой стояла наполненная сухой пылью пустота”<sup>59</sup>. The memory of death connected to stone-crosses is annihilated in the woman's emptiness, which is inhabited only by dry dust. “Живое стало неживым”<sup>60</sup> as dust – dead stone emptied out of its memory. The same characteristic is shared by the suffocating *stepnaya pyl'* [dust of the steppe]<sup>61</sup> found everywhere in the novel, and often accompanied by *dym* [smoke]. Interestingly, none of the sixty occurrences of *пыль* [dust] in *Life and Fate* is associated with dead bodies burnt to ashes in concentration camps, as if their memories could not be lost and turn into dust.

Coming back to *An Armenian Sketchbook*, it is noteworthy that the Triumph of Death, the strange and terrible kingdom where “земля родит не жизнь, а смерть”<sup>62</sup>, is not the end of the story.

A third force comes into play against the mountains and time: the Armenian people. Armenians are not defined in their physical traits; instead of description, their characterisation is conveyed by their actions, which seem to be performed by a unique

<sup>57</sup> R. Chandler, Yu. Bit-Yunan, “Introduction”, op. cit., p. VII.

<sup>58</sup> R. Chandler, “Introduction”, V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*, New York 1985, p. XV.

<sup>59</sup> “There was nothing but dry dust over her head”, V. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenij v chetyrekh tomakh. Zhizn' i sud'ba*, Moskva 1998, p. 105.

<sup>60</sup> “Everything living had become inanimate”, Ibidem.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 464.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, *Sobranie sochinenij-Povest'*, op. cit., p. 188; for the English version see “The earth engenders not life but death”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 187; for the English version see “The first thing I saw in Armenia was stone; and what I took away when I left was a memory of stone”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 187; for the English version see “What expresses the soul of Armenia is stone”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Idem, *Sobranie*, op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem; for the English version see “Time has triumphed; time is invincible”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 65.

body. So, the Armenian nation faces and fights against the stony death left by the two abovementioned natural forces. The small nation is indeed a great nation, a *malen'ky velikan* [small giant] who has the strength to turn stone into mounds of juicy vegetables and the very sweetest of grapes<sup>63</sup>. However, Grossman's admiration for the Armenian people should not be mistaken for a support of the concepts of nation and nationalism, since Grossman rejects the concept of nationalism as an ideology supporting the leadership of one nation over others<sup>64</sup>.

Like Lermontov, who considers stone as a distinctive feature of Caucasian nature and its human artefacts, and Mandelstam, who treats stone as a healing natural element and an architectural component, Grossman describes stone both as a natural and a human feature of the Caucasus. However, in his vision human activity is part of the natural process, in which “Маленький великан оживляет мертвый камень, и тот становится живым кристаллом”<sup>65</sup>. There is no clash between the civilised human being and wild nature, in that humans are part of nature. The author's sympathy is attracted by the indefatigable labour the Armenian people have accomplished in turning dead stone into living crystal, the terrestrial paradise full of juicy fruit.

Towards the end of his report, his attitude turns into empathy towards the Armenian people, who have ultimately shown to have a high degree of kinship with the Jews, Grossman's people; as noted by Ferrari, the two nations share ancient roots, a national identity intertwined with religious identity, the loss of their motherland, the diaspora, and the experience of genocide<sup>66</sup>.

At the end of this excursus on travel writing in the Caucasus, I would like to point out the fol-

lowing feature shared by the three Russian writers I have considered. Whether the authors' descriptions overtly underline the uniqueness of the Caucasian landscape and nature, their experiences as travellers in this region were ultimately affected by its most inspiring element: the Caucasian people. The traveller Grossman is struck by the Caucasian landscape, the kingdom of dead stone, but his feelings are moved by the people he met in their routine. Similarly, Lermontov depicts breath-taking landscapes and sublime mountains, but his lines linger on a fascinating Georgian princess and on a mysterious mountain boy. Although concentrated on the natural surroundings, even Mandelstam is moved by the people living in the Caucasus, by “жизненное наполнение армян, их грубая ласковость, их благородная трудовая кость”<sup>67</sup>.

As a traveller in the Caucasus, I too was first impressed by the wild beauty of the Caucasian landscapes and the ancient monuments disseminated in this land; however, despite the wide range of different peoples with different origins and traditions and the revival of foolish nationalisms, in the Caucasus what fascinated me the most was an ineffable feature shared by the people living there, irrespective of their ethnicity. Therefore, I would like to endorse Grossman's quotation related to the Armenian nation and, as already mentioned, widen its scope to all the Caucasian peoples: “Но маленький великан не только трудится, он любит выпить и закусить. Он пьет и закусывает, а выпивши, он пляшет, шумит и поет песни”<sup>68</sup>.

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Daniele Artoni, “Dust and Stone: Caucasian Sketches in Lermontov, Mandelstam and Grossman”, *eSamizdat*, 2016 (XI), pp. 63-70

<sup>63</sup> Grossman writes “лишь великану под силу превращать камень в сладчайший виноград, в сочные холмы овощей”, Idem, *Sobranie sochinenij-Povest'*, op. cit., p. 189; for the English version see “only a giant has the strength to turn stone into mounds of juicy vegetables and the very sweetest of grapes”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>64</sup> A. Ferrari, “L'Armenia”, op. cit., p. 434.

<sup>65</sup> V. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenij-Povest'*, op. cit., p. 190; for the English version see “The small giant brings dead stone to life, and the stone becomes a living crystal”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> A. Ferrari, “L'Armenia”, op. cit., p. 442.

<sup>67</sup> “The live fulfilment of the Armenians, their rude tenderness, their noble working bones”, O. Mandelstam, *Sobranie sochinenij*, op. cit., p. 143.

<sup>68</sup> V. Grossman, *Sobranie sochinenij-Povest'*, op. cit., p. 190; for the English version see “But the small giant does not just work; he also likes to drink and to have a bite to eat when he drinks. And then he dances; he laughs, shouts, and sings”, Idem, *An Armenian Sketchbook*, op. cit., p. 68.